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ABSTRACT

Ivy Tech State College (Indiana) is the statewide two-year college system in Indiana, with 23 campuses and a fall 2002 enrollment of 64,110 credit students and approximately 13,000 non-credit students. Ivy Tech has a long history of offering certification training and, in some cases, testing, in a variety of areas from health to business and technology. Previous to 2000, each campus offered whatever certification training seemed to be needed by the local workforce. In 2000, the college developed a strategic plan for implementation of workforce certification centers, initially at several campuses, with a more extensive rollout plan for the following 2 years. Nine hundred thousand dollars from an external funding source was distributed to eight campuses in the first year. The Certification Crosswalk was developed with the assistance of faculty committees to match, wherever appropriate, certifications with credit coursework. In addition to providing more access and flexibility for the students, the initiative offers recognition of students' past learning experiences as well. The program was also conceived as a means to compete with private, for-profit providers by seamlessly integrating certification earned into degree credit. In addition, the program serves to link the Corporate and Continuing Education Services (CCES) with the academic side of the college. (Author/NB)

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Certification Synergy: Adding Value to the Curriculum

By Rebecca Nickoli and Mark Keen

Community colleges are faced with increasing demands to meet the economic development needs in their service areas. At the same time, they are faced with increased competition from private sector vendors who offer similar educational opportunities, often with more flexible formats. In the face of the state's workforce development needs and the many possible strategies for satisfying them, Ivy Tech State College decided to develop a network of Workforce Certification Centers at its 23 campuses around the state of Indiana.

Ivy Tech State College is the statewide two-year college system in Indiana, with 23 campuses strategically located around the state and with a Fall 2002 enrollment of 64,110 credit students and approximately 13,000 non-credit students. Ivy Tech has a long history of offering certification training and, in some cases testing, in a variety of discipline areas from health to business to technology; in fact, training was offered related to over 160 different certifications and licensing requirements. Previous to 2000, each campus offered whatever certification training seemed to be needed by the local workforce. Students often had to drive to larger cities to find testing providers to certify their skills once training had taken place.

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In 2000, the College identified developing more workforce certification activity as a priority to add value to the curriculum, to add to the opportunities for credentialing available to students, and to add to the cadre of skilled workers in the state. The College developed a strategic plan to implement workforce certification centers initially at several of its campuses, with a more extensive roll-out planned over the following two years. The centers were to focus on Information Technology (IT) certifications, with a "Top Eight" list identified as the most likely to attract enrollments.

Part of the plan was to increase capacity by institutionalizing the system-wide approach to how certification training and testing is developed and delivered. The College also intended to capitalize on its statewide nature in working out partnerships with certification vendors. To coordinate the system-wide effort, two staff members at the system office were identified to work with campus personnel to develop policies, procedures, vendor partnerships and to coordinate the training of campus faculty who needed to earn certifications themselves to teach the certification courses.

An external source of funding was identified for the first year implementation and $900,000 was distributed to eight campuses through an RFP process. Campuses used funds to purchase equipment for training and testing and hired new staff to coordinate marketing, enrollments, test proctoring, and other responsibilities associated with certification. Activities were coordinated between the program faculty and the contract training staff, so that students would have both credit and non-credit options for the certification courses. It is important to note that several other campuses not receiving

new funding in the first year elected to re-allocate funds internally to start workforce certification centers.

In the second year of the initiative, the state allocated $900,000 funding for the initiative and another six campuses were funded. State funding has continued into the project's third year, and the remaining campuses will receive funding in early 2003. Because of the state's economic crisis, the amount allocated was cut by 7%, but both the state and the College have remained committed to workforce certification as an important economic development tool.

In addition to providing more access and flexibility for students, another important element of the College's workforce certification initiative was the recognition of students' past learning experiences. This was approached both through the development of a system-wide Prior Learning Assessment program and through the "Certification Crosswalk."

Each campus had previously evaluated students' prior learning experiences upon request. However, there were not system-wide guidelines for how that evaluation should be conducted or recorded. While the assessment of prior learning experiences remains the responsibility of the faculty, they now have consistent guidelines, forms, and a free online tutorial to help students develop a portfolio of prior learning. To see the tutorial, go to: www.ivytech.edu/pla/tutorial.

The Certification Crosswalk was developed with the assistance of faculty curriculum committees to match, wherever appropriate, certifications with credit coursework. Students who have earned certifications that are part of the credit program's curricula can now receive the credit equivalent for those certifications, thus shortening time to earn a degree. Again, each campus had previously evaluated certifications earned at the student's request, but there were not system-wide guidelines for doing so consistently. To see the crosswalk, go to: www.ivytech.edu/pla/crosswalk.html.

While there is much to say about the operational aspects of developing a campus workforce certification center, this article concentrates on the "Academic Initiative" that became a fundamental part of the workforce certification operation at the College. The committees that developed policies and procedures for workforce certification determined early on that, in order for the initiative to be successful, it would be necessary to have the "buy in" of the faculty who teach in the certification courses, particularly those who teach in the credit programs and from the staff in Corporate and Continuing Education Services (CCES), the contract training arm of the College.

From the beginning, the system-wide Workforce Certification Committee recognized the need to integrate certification training into the academic operations of the College as well as the CCES division. As we thought about the competition, we recognized there were already a large number of high cost, for-profit providers in most of the service delivery areas. The thing that we recognized would distinguish our program from all the rest was our ability to seamlessly integrate the certifications earned into degree credit.

A second reason for the focus on integration was related to our desire to better link our own CCES division and the academic side of the College. The non-credit and the credit departments could probably communicate and cooperate more effectively than we previously had been doing. Thus, the integration of certification into the program curricula became the vehicle to explore that opportunity.

To help achieve the desired end, the committee established a philosophical approach that we believed would help alleviate some of the concerns of our critical stakeholders. First, we agreed that certification would not be in competition with the academic degree programs- rather, they would actually create synergy for them. Second, there would be value in this for all participants. If the faculty believed the benefits of the program accrued to CCES, they would be less than enthused about participating and vice-versa. Third, we believe certification is a critical element of the College mission. There is a need for this type of training in our state and we believed it was our role to make it available to our constituents at a reasonably affordable price. Fourth, we believed that certification is a viable component of lifelong learning. Not everyone wants or needs a Computer Science degree. A nationally recognized certification may be the right fit for some students. The ability to earn one AND have it integrated into an academic degree program makes our model all that much more attractive.

Further, certification provides an alternate "front door." The type of student interested in certifications may not be the typical student we attract. By adding certification to our

menu we now have an entirely new niche population to whom we can market our services. Once they experience success with our institution, they are more likely to consider what else it is that we have to offer.

Certifications also add relevance and validity to our curriculum. If certifications have currency in the world of work (and we believe they do) they provide a means by which we can keep our curriculum current and relevant. This initiative provides the College with the opportunity to capitalize on the standards established for each nationally recognized certification. Since many of the training courses were done for credit, each program saw the immediate benefit of increased program enrollment. This pays particular dividends for the program chairs (many of whom are highly motivated by FTE) because they are 1.) attracting students who might not have otherwise considered Ivy Tech, and 2.) some of these students will decide to pursue a degree as a result of having earned credit through the certification.

An additional benefit to the College is the ability to use the certification courses as a way to "train the trainer." Many faculty want a means to stay current in their respective disciplines but the high cost of doing so can be prohibitive. Last, and perhaps one of the most important reasons we saw certification as a real value added to the institution was the ability to demonstrate yet one more measure of our productivity and our contribution to economic development. State policy makers are typically interested in graduation rates, yet many of our students do not intend to earn a degree. They simply want the skills to get a job, keep a job, or get a promotion or salary increase.

One advantage the College had was the inventory of related certification already available through the College. This advantage served two primary purposes. First, it allowed us to concentrate on the "low hanging fruit" by tapping into the expertise that was already out there. Second, it gave us a tremendous platform to build awareness and help bridge the link between what we were already doing and where we saw the certification efforts going. Another advantage we had was a schedule of annual curriculum review meetings for every academic program. We were able to incorporate certification as a discussion and action item into every single program committee that met. During that discussion, committees began the dialogue on how important certifications could be for their respective programs. More importantly, they agreed on how nationally recognized certifications could transfer into the program, allowing advanced placement for what the individual already demonstrated he/she knew and could do. The outcome of this process resulted in one of the more powerful tools we now have in our toolbox - the Certification Crosswalk.

One of the critical turning points for integrating certification into the academic courses was the development of the Academic Initiative. The intent was to provide varying levels of "buy-in" for the faculty. The Academic Initiative includes the following levels of commitment to integration of certification into the curriculum:

a. Strengthening current course objectives or adding new ones in courses that directly address preparation for taking the certification examination associated with that course. Certain certification-based courses would have objectives based on the published certification exam objectives.

b. Using more vendor course materials that reinforce the certification objectives in these courses.

c. Using certified faculty to teach certification–based courses.

d. Requiring that students take the certification examination as a course activity. No student's final grade would be adversely affected by passing (or not) the exam; however, the final grade could be positively affected by passing the exam.

e. Incorporating the cost of the test into the cost of the course. Including costs in this manner may allow for financial aid to cover the cost of testing for eligible students.

The Academic Initiative included the development of a Faculty Training Agreement. The training agreement was developed to allow faculty to participate in the certification related training. Campuses were given a template (a contract of sorts) to use in negotiating with faculty. Faculty could participate in a given training session at no cost by agreeing to deliver a certain number of certification courses, once they themselves

were certified, over an identified timeframe. The agreement helped the College protect its investment and allowed faculty the opportunity to get professional development they needed, all within the context of a mutually agreed upon arrangement.

To support the Academic Initiative, students were encouraged to register for review sessions at no cost. Faculty were given the opportunity to teach these review sessions as a means of earning extra income.

During our first year we saw significant achievements. The College met or exceeded the quantitative goals for students and faculty trained and certified. The College launched its own "Certify Indiana" website (www.certifyindiana.com) which serves as a resource for anyone interested in pursuing certification. It contains information about certification and allows interested parties to get in touch with the center nearest their location. As you can imagine, we have also accumulated numerous individual success stories and could tell you compelling stories of students who participated in the process and achieved goals beyond what they imagined possible. Accomplishing these goals in a statewide system as large and diverse as ours is no small accomplishment.

We have learned some lessons along the way. For some, it was a surprise to learn that not all faculty will buy into the process. Some months into the effort, we decided to concentrate our efforts on the "champions" who are willing to be involved and not focus on those who were not "on board" yet. We also learned that everything takes longer than expected. It takes time for faculty to become certified, to get staff trained to administer

the exams, and to develop consistent operational procedures. During the developmental months of operation, we saw little training and certification activity.

We also learned how to serve the differences between certification training and testing. That is, not all students who train are ready to test immediately; further, we served individuals who trained elsewhere and came to us for the testing process. Both training and testing bring unique set of challenges but both are necessary to achieve the desired end results.

We are now building on the success of the first two years. Much time, effort, and money have been expended to build an infrastructure to support certification at Ivy Tech. In 2003, we will capitalize on that infrastructure. We will expand our focus to include more non-IT certifications. We need to develop better tracking mechanisms. We need to be able to readily access data so we can effectively use it to effect change to the overall process. Finally, we need to move toward profitability. We have learned that the most popular certifications are not necessarily the most profitable ones.

As Ivy Tech moves into the future with its Workforce Certification Center initiative, it is clear that the model we have developed supports the College's mission, enhances the preparation of Indiana's workforce, and appropriately connects the credit and non-credit programs of the College. So far it looks like we are headed in the right direction.

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